HARMONY SHATTERED: THE DILEMMA AND CHALLENGES OF A DISORDERED ONTOLOGICAL (COSMIC RELIGIOUS AND ETHICAL) VISION IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICA

Christopher I. Ejizu, PhD
St Patrick’s Catholic Church, Ichi, Anambra State, Nigeria
ejizu@yahoo.com

Abstract
Traditionally, Africans, like most of their counterparts in other parts of the globe, cultivate and live by an ontological order and vision of reality that are essentially holistic and highly integrated. Life in all its spheres, the visible and invisible, was understood to be deeply interconnected with the animate, material world as well as the cosmic and supersensible order mutually influencing one another. Religion was the overarching reality undergirding the ethical realm. Norms of acceptable human conduct were held to be the dictates of gods and ancestral spirits. Their observance fell under the watchful eyes of gods and ancestors. Harmony prevailed so long as the delicate balance that characterizes the fundamental vision was maintained. Life was generally predictable and the wellbeing of all creatures in the universe, human and non-human was guaranteed. Interestingly, the holistic vision was shattered in the mid-nineteenth century A.D. when external agents of change gained access into Africa’s heartland. The new ontological order imported by colonial administrators, European merchants and Christian missionaries, emphasizes separation and the distinctiveness of the different spheres of human life and awareness. And this has had far-reaching consequences ever since for all domains of life in the continent. This essay focuses particularly on the social upheaval and chaotic situation that have arisen in several modern African societies caused by the displacement of the cosmic vision. I shall discuss some of the negative implications of the change for the ethical order. The issues of formation of individual conscience, legitimation of norms to guide people’s conduct as well as implementation of sanctions and deterrents have become highly problematic. Drawing from my experience and research in Nigeria, I propose to examine the dilemma and important challenges the current situation poses to orderly, peaceful harmonious living and development in most countries in contemporary Africa.

Key Words: Africa, gods, Ancestors, Traditional, Ethical, Holistic, Chaotic

1 Christopher I. Ejizu is an Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria. He is the Parish Priest of St Patrick’s Catholic Church, Ichi, Anambra State, Nigeria.
Introduction

The phenomenal success of European Christian missionary evangelism in Africa from the mid-nineteenth-century A.D. onwards is well celebrated inside and outside the continent. Several images, most of which are drawn from the field of war have been employed by authors and scholars to paint pictures of what is thought to have taken place. O.U. Kalu wrote about “the rout of the gods”. E.A. Eyandele spoke of “the collapse of the walls of ‘pagandom’ Jericho-wise in Igboland”. E. Ikenga-Metuh depicted the picture of “the gods in retreat”. But it was Chinua Achebe, the celebrated story-teller, who drew attention to the not-well-known aspect of that historic encounter with the thought-provoking title for his award-winning novel; “Things Fall Apart”. The complex interaction of adherents of traditional African religions with Christian missionary agents from Europe and the Americas resulted not only in the massive conversion of millions of youthful Africans to Christianity, it triggered the unprecedented destabilization and transformation of the fundamental orientation and perception of reality that Africans had cultivated and lived by for ages. That traditional cosmic vision had assisted the people to explain and predict space-time events, and to exert control over events. Thus, social order, various forms of divination and the quest for survival and happiness were possible, and the insecure feeling of being lost in an inexplicable, uncontrollable cosmos was taken care of. Above all, the cosmic vision provided a unified picture of the universe, explained by a system of concepts which order the natural and social rhythms and the place of individuals and communities in them. Incidentally, the traditional cosmic vision was radically altered and finally supplanted. In place of its holistic and highly integrated view of reality, we now have an imported ontological order that emphasizes the separateness and distinctiveness of the different spheres; cosmic, religious and ethical.

Most colonial administrators had believed that the imported socio-political dispensation imposed on ‘native tribes’ and propped up by force of arms would catch on with time in the colonies. But, there is the snag and also the root of the dilemma. Things have apparently proceeded without too many hitches in the cosmic and religious orders. The steady report of growing population of converts to the immigrant faiths (Christianity and Islam in particular), the variety of new religious movements that have continued to sprout in different parts of the continent as well as the increasing quest for esoteric and mystical explanations are some of the indicators. In contrast, matters appear to have grown from bad to worse in the ethical sphere. In addition to intermittent mass

---

protests against certain official policies of government such as taxation of
women, it became extremely difficult to secure loyalty and compliance of
individuals and groups to laws and other specific norms of public moral order.
In recent times, issues of social control, public order and morality have become
matters of grave concern to people. Generally, issues related to ethics and right
conscience have deteriorated to a near-chaotic situation. The one question on
most people’s lips is, for how long the terrible situation can continue.

I shall in this paper try to articulate the persisting dilemma that has
become part and parcel of life directly related to the shattered order and cosmic
harmony, ensuing confusion in the prevalent value orientation in several African
societies, including Nigeria. I shall also try to highlight the enormous challenge
the crisis poses to life and well-being of the population. Finally, the essay will
try to discuss in some detail the way forward, how to harness the positive aspects
of the available order towards the restoration of a viable cosmic vision with
ethics firmly embedded for the benefit and well-being of the people and society
at large.

The Chaotic Ethical Situation

The impression is often erroneously created that Africa is a depressed
and poverty-stricken continent. (The global news networks help to sustain this
negative image with graphic pictures of mal-nourished children, sick and aged
folks infested with flies, which they beam to their international audience).
Nothing could be farther away from the truth than such a poor image. Africa
may be poorly developed in terms of infrastructures and socio-political
institutions. But the truth is that the continent is one of the most richly endowed
regions of the globe by nature. The continent has abundance of youthful
manpower, hundreds of thousands of hectares of arable land that could be used
for agriculture, most favourable climate and numerous other material resources.
It is equally notable for its rich deposit of many priceless metals and minerals
including gold, uranium, silver, kolumbite, zinc, iron ore, tin, crude oil and
natural gas, to mention a few. The negative impression carried by the global
news channels help even to make the point of this essay, namely; the dilemma
and dreadful implications of a disordered ontological vision with particular
emphasis on the negative consequences for the ethical realm.

Several African countries, particularly Nigeria, are currently in the throes
of a debilitating slow-killer disease. It goes by the general name of corruption.
In the words of J.O Omeregbe, “naked greed, dishonesty and corruption have
eaten so deep into the social fabric of most African countries, they have become
“virtues” in most of our societies.”” Having served for several years as the Chairperson of the University of Port Harcourt anti-corruption watchdog (ACTU-Uniport) I had the benefit of first hand exposure to piles of official and unofficial reports of a wide range of cases of corruption plaguing the Nigerian society. There are regular reports of outright embezzlement of public funds meant for development, general moral indiscipline and reckless behavior with funds, lack of accountability, dishonesty on the part of public officials.

The youth are not spared either as there are also all sorts of reports of ethical impropriety and moral abuse in schools. The recurrent fraudulent practices include forgery of certificates, leakage of examination papers (alias “expo”), manipulation of grades, impersonation at examination as well as outright selling/buying of results/grades.

Africa is said to host some of the most corrupt nations of the world. Virtually, every case of international fraud reported in the United States of America, Germany or the United Kingdom, involving big multinational corporations like Halliburton, Wilbros and/or Shell BP oftentimes pencils Nigeria or one of the other fifty-three countries of Africa as one regular theatre where the demons of corruption and fraud of the world are “out and about for a kill”. Similarly, in the index of the international anti-corruption watchdog, Transparency International, African countries regularly bring up the rear as among the most morally corrupt nations in the world. Indeed, a former colleague at the University of Port Harcourt once daubed Nigeria in such unflattering terms as, “about the most corrupt society on earth, ‘a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit enriching the merchants of the world’”. The negative toll of the reckless behavior of some powerful and well placed individuals, as well as the moral depravity of the rank and file in the continent is sadly written large on the annals of virtually every nation’s development index. In a related development, several countries including Burundi the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) South-Sudan, Uganda and Zaire have been plunged into spiral and unending internecine conflicts, while kidnapping, armed robbery and brutal killings have continued unabated in other places like Nigeria.

It was in fact Thomas Hobbes who long ago spoke of “the state of nature” in the history of society. By this he meant a situation in which everybody was only concerned about his/her own self-interest with no sense of morality. I dare suggest that that is the situation where citizens of most black African nations presently find themselves, a direct consequence of the destabilization of the

---


fundamental cosmic vision, the total disregard and abandonment of the delicately balanced traditional order, in particular the disconnect of the ethical order.

The Challenge

It has been suggested by some scholars that Christianity brought from Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries is largely to blame for systematically destroying the acute indigenous moral sense and the delicately balanced traditional cosmic vision with its sharp ethical sensitivities, which most African peoples had inherited from their forebears (Ofo n’Ogu ndi Igbo, Omenala/Ama-ala). The frequent preaching of a compassionate and merciful God of Jesus Christ as well as the general tenor of morality imported from the West are partly to blame for the present-day malaise in moral standards of most contemporary African communities.

Without doubt, there is urgent need to confront the challenges the disorganized ontological order poses, with particular reference to the confusion in the ethical life of the people. This is closely followed by the discussion of a relevant cosmic vision that would have the ethical order firmly embedded in its basic structure. Pulling the continent out of the current terrible rot (of ethical quagmire) appears to be the only meaningful path to sustainable development and progress for the nations of Africa, particularly Nigeria. The first step in this all important process of social re-engineering has to be the re-focussing of the fundamental ontological vision that should undergird everyday life and provide basic orientation for people and communities. Such a re-ordering should not be construed as a return to the status quo ante, that is, the state of affairs in pre-colonial and pre-evangelized era in the continent. Radical socio-religious and political change has taken place in most of the continent. It appears irreversible at this stage. Africa has opened her arms in welcome to the immigrant religions, and their close associates of modernity and western socio-political civilization and patterns. Millions of Africans of all ages and classes have accepted the missionary religions (Christianity and Islam) as their living religions and fundamental vision of life respectively. Contemporary African communities are no longer homogeneous as in the past, but heterogeneous in nature with plural ideologies and orientations. Additionally, several countries have evolved secular national constitutions respectively. The latter ostensibly separates religion from civil life and the affairs of state. The challenges to evolving a workable cosmic vision in contemporary Africa south of the Sahara are clearly enormous, but not insurmountable.

---

The Way Forward

The intellectual development that led to the separation of the sacred and the secular in the West is fairly known. Students of history of ideas are familiar with the route through which the highly industrialised nations of the West arrived at the current stage in their cultural development, often referred to as the post-modern and post-Christian era. Before the First World War, major shifts in intellectual and cultural thought had started in the continent of Europe. There was preference for new philosophical movements like empiricism and rationalism that accept reason as the only source of reliable knowledge. By the end of the 19th century A.D., varieties of Hegelian and neo-Hegelian ideas of development hostile to religion dominated most universities in Europe. In Austria, for instance, a group of young philosophers that came to be known as the Vienna Circle propagated a philosophy system that was based on the idea that the methods of science and mathematics were the final test of truth and meaning. Alfred Jules Ayer popularised the ideas of the Vienna Circle in the English-speaking countries while Bertrand Russell (1872 – 1917) and many American pragmatist philosophers were easily won over to that camp. Thus, a loosely organized intellectual movement that came to be known as logical empiricism or positivism based on the position of the Vienna Circle became dominant. It has since come to have considerable influence in the English-speaking world since the 19th century.

The post-modern era is characterized by what J.L. Lyotard refers to as the “end of grand narratives”. The phase also describes the “dissolution of those universal principles that the organic intellectuals of modernity had advanced as authoritative rules for insuring the rational improvement of social organization and individual conduct under the leadership of the modern centralized state”. K. Ward concurs as he identifies a central feature of the age as the absence of “grand meta-narratives, no total explanations, no overall structures of meaning, no universal foundation of knowledge”. Post-modernism is seen by many in negative light, and thought to herald deconstruction. It calls everything into question, breaks up assumptions and collapses the barriers between space and time. In the liberal cultural setting of modern Western societies, secularism has succeeded in privatizing religion and, morality is now seen as an autonomous domain fully independent of religion. The natural law theory of morality which dates back to Aristotle in ancient Greece and the elaborations of it made by Saint Thomas Aquinas in the Medieval Period emphasizes the importance of conscience in moral development as well as the value of virtue in moral life.

---

Fortunately, prior to the historic development, Europeans had with the aid of the Christian Church, successfully transfused their cultures and value systems, as well as molded people’s consciences in line with fundamental principles and tenets of the Christian faith. This was a unique achievement. Black African nations were not as fortunate. Most of them still laboured under the burden of colonialism and never had the opportunity to choose whichever ideology or social system they deemed most appropriate for their peoples and cultures. The disjointed alien system based on a totally different ideology was simply foisted on the emergent states. It was a poorly digested system with its secularized agencies, particularly, of law enforcement and social control. That was hurriedly set-up in the colonies without much regard as to their relevance to the cultures of the different peoples. The net-result has sadly been a haphazard establishment that has resulted in a near total collapse of law and order in several black African nations.

Detractors may object to any attempt to rehabilitate religion as such in any contemporary fundamental vision on the grounds that it (religion) has been badly discredited due to its dysfunctional role. The negative criticisms of S. Freud and Karl Marx are among the better known. Religion, in the words of Sigmund Freud is, “no more than an infantile obsessional neurosis”. For Karl Marx, it is the opium which the bourgeoisie employ to soothe the masses.

Further still, continuing revolution in the fields of science and technology, as well as rapid modernization of societies, have also joined forces to bring about a major shift in the way the average Westerner has come to view the world. Modern man has apparently come of age. Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 – 1900 A.D.) and Arthur Schopenhauer before him announced, “God is dead”. Secularism driven by its twin ideology of relativism forced the privatization of religion, exiling it from public place, thus paving way for the hegemony of economics and politics and for the unscrupulous pursuit of both. Swami Agnaveshi further explains that;

While religions continued to be practiced in the private domain, religious conscience ceased to be a formative principle in human affairs locally and nationally. This subverted the cause of social justice, especially in societies without welfare states. Religion continues to be professed, but life as a whole is lived on the foundations of culture with its preferred models of economics, politics and science. As long as this outlook remains, the prospect of tempering predatory greed with the resilience of a religious conscience remains bleak.

---

The clear note of optimism is that religion remains a strong social force in most black African countries. Against that backdrop, especially given the outstanding positive contribution of religion to the growth and development of most African nations, its significant formative potential and record of training of people, the argument for its rehabilitation should not be too difficult to make. However, the prevailing complex circumstances of existing socio-historical realities of individual states demand that the process be handled cautiously and on individual case basis.

**Conclusion**

Harmony is a primary feature of any well integrated ontological order. Through such a fundamental vision, the insecure feeling of being lost in an explicable and uncontrollable cosmos is taken care of. Humans are able to explain and predict space-time events and to exert control over them. Traditionally, black African peoples south of the Sahara had evolved and lived by such organically integrated vision of reality for ages. They lived in harmony among themselves, with their environment and with the rest of the created universe. They enjoyed considerable measure of security as they were able to explain their cosmos as well as reality in general. With such a fundamental and unified vision that involved the cosmic, ethical and the religious orders, Africans were able to enjoy relative peace and development. The religious realm was key in that vision, as people strongly believed that their gods and ancestral spirits invested the cosmic and the ethical aspects with sacredness and anchored reality as a whole in the transcendental centre of ultimate meaning. The authority of supernatural beings, including God, divinities and ancestral spirits was brought to bear, bolster and legitimate the norms of acceptable behavior. The displacement of this crucial aspect in people’s fundamental vision has deprived the latter of a crucial aspect with its tremendous formative potential, as well as unleashed untold negative consequences on the life of individuals and communities in the continent. The destabilization needs must be promptly addressed in order that harmony could be restored and normal peaceful life and development could return to communities in the continent.